DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 756 FL 006 838

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TITLE Alternatives to the Foreign Language Curriculum: Individualized French Composition and Conversation.
PUB DATE 74
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Language Programs; Conversational Language Courses; *Course Descriptions; Curriculum Development; *French; Higher Education; *Individualized Instruction; Individualized Programs; *Language Instruction; Program Descriptions; *Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

Individualized French Composition and Conversation is a third-year self-paced course which allows that student to proceed at his own speed through a prescribed set of materials. The course is divided into lessons, each of which is then divided into objectives with activities suggested by the instructor. The student is evaluated on these objectives only when he feels prepared; however, a minimum number of lessons have to be completed by the end of the quarter in order to successfully complete the course. The four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are emphasized. The class meets periodically as a group for conversation practice and grammar or cultural discussions. At other times, students meet in small groups or individually with the instructor. In general, class is conducted in a rather informal manner. The student, however, knows at all times what is expected of him and where he stands as far as these expectations are concerned. Inasmuch as students do not all learn at the same rate, it is hoped that such a course will help alleviate some of the problems experienced by both student and teacher in a lock-step system in which slow, average, and fast learners are placed together. (Author/PMP)

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Alternatives to the Foreign Language Curriculm: Individualized French Composition and Conversation

A relatively modern concept, individualized instruction grew out of the need for more attention to individual differences in aptitude, desires and characteristics of learners. In the traditional lock-step method of instruction, students are required to learn a specific corpus of material within a certain span of time. Generally no allowances are made for those students who are quick to learn, nor for those who are slow to learn. Consequently, while some learners may get bored and lose interest, others become frustrated. In such a system, the teacher is the center of learning and determines the rate of speed at which material will be covered.

To illustrate, let's say that in the traditional lock-step system of instruction the teacher introduces the material to be learned --in this case, a dialog-- on Monday. On Tuesday, teacher reviews the dialog, having students act it out, and asks questions on it. Teacher then introduces pattern drills focusing on some structure presented in the dialog. On Wednesday, teacher discusses grammar point(s) based on the dialog and has the students do exercises illustrating it (these). On Thursday, students concentrate on reading exercises (for example, a recombination exercise). Note that exercises on writing can be conducted --and perhaps should-- on any or all of the previous three days. On Friday, students are <u>formally</u> evaluated on the week's material.

In this system, all students are tested on Friday whether they have all learned the material or not. Those students who may have assimilated (or been able to assimilate) the material by Thursday--or before-- will simply have to wait until Friday. On the other hand, those students who may need to work more in a certain area will just have to try and make up that deficiency somehow. But come Friday and

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they too will be tested in all areas, as will the fast and average learners. Generally, such a system does not allow for individual differences and penalizes students who do not learn a certain body of material within a specified period of time. In an individualized program, the situation is different. Students become the center of learning, generally determining their own rate of speed. Allowances are made for both fast and slow learners, while at the same time high standards are maintained since teaching is for mastery of material. In the hypothetical situation cited (above), those students who have assimilated the material to be learned by Thursday, or before, would be evaluated at that time, thus allowing them to move on to other things. Whereas, those students having (particular) difficulties would get special attention from the teacher who would identify problem areas and offer remedies. They would then be evaluated only after they have had a chance to work on their problems.

During recent years, much has been said about individualization of instruction. Most--if not all--pedagogical periodicals appearing these days include a discussion of this new approach to teaching--and learning. The same is true for profession meetings, at which there is generally at least one section on individualization. Clearly, individualization of instruction as an alternative approach is enjoying great popularity. A number of us--whether from intellectual curiosity or because certain factors have strongly encouraged a search for alternatives--have become informed about individualization. Some of us have even attempted to implement such a program in our foreign language classes. I made such an attempt at the third year level in French during the winter quarter of 1974, and would like to report on the results so far of that effort.

French composition and conversation is a three quarter course at The University of Toledo offered at the junior year level. Classes meet three times a week for a period of ten weeks per quarter. The course emphasizes the skills of listening-comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, and is designed for French majors as well as non-majors. Students enrolled in the course generally have varied

backgrounds in French, with some completing the second quarter intermediate level at the university; whereas, others place directly into third year French by virtue of their scores on the MLA Placement tests. Of these two groups, some students seem more audio-lingually oriented, having greater facility in listening-comprehension and speaking than the other skills. Other students are more grammar-oriented and are better able to read and write. Such diversity in backgrounds, as well as the level of competency, have resulted in problems that are not easily remedied in the traditional lock-step method of instruction. Conversations in French have tended to be one-sided, usually with only the same few students participating during a given class period. The results have generally been frustration for the weaker students and boredom for those with a stronger background.

In an attempt to cope with these problems, I inaugurated a three quarter program of individualized French composition and conversation during the winter quarter of 1974. In my initial proposal to the class, students were given the choice of continuing in the traditional lock-step system, or opting for the new program which allowed them to proceed at their own pace. Unanimously, they chose the latter.

In the lock-step program, classes met three times per week for fifty minutes per period during a ten-week quarter. Using as a basic conversation text Yvone Lenard and Ralph Hester: L'Art de la conversation (Harper and Row, 1967), the class discussed topics announced in advance for five class meetings. The next two or three class periods were allotted to grammar discussions taken from Léon Hoffmann: L'Essentiel de la grammaire française. 2ème Édition. (Scribners, 1973) and Léon Hoffmann: Travaux Pratiques. 2ème Édition. (Scribners, 1973). Subsequent to this, the class had a one-hour exam covering the material discussed during the last seven or eight class periods. While generally effective, this format did not sufficiently allow for students needing additional work in specific skills. On the other hand, an individualized format afforded greater flexibility.

As envisioned, the objective of the self-paced course was toward fluency in French, with emphasis upon the four skills of listening-comprehension, speaking, reading and writing. Using the same texts mentioned (above), I formulated performance objectives and learning activities, and labelled these "Learning Paquets". Other materials included tapes that accompany L'Art de la conversation, as well as special practice tapes. These consisted of questions in French based on the topics discussed in the basic conversation text.

Class met three times per week for fifty minutes per period. I met with the students as a group for a portion of each period, during which time we had conversation practice and grammar or culture discussions. The remainder of the period was devoted to small group practice/discussion and evaluation. When a student needed help, he worked individually with the teacher, or with some other person in a tutorial manner. The student was allowed to proceed through the curriculum materials at his own pace, testing only when he felt prepared. However, a minimum number of lessons or learning paquets had to be completed in order to proceed to the next level. For example, three lessons or sixteen objectives were required per quarter. The material to be covered was divided as follows:

French 301: Lessons one through four
French 302: Lessons five through eight
French 303: Lessons nine through twelve

In this program a student could complete more than the minimum required number of lessons. Hence it was possible to do two quarter's work in one. On the other hand, a student completing less than the minimum required number of lessons received an "Incomplete", which was to be removed during the following quarter.

Since tests were criterion-referenced, each objective was evaluated separately and based on 100 points. For example, a student evaluated on objective one had to answer ten questions orally, with 90% accuracy and acceptable pronunciation and fluency. Should he perform below the minimum acceptable level, he would then work with the material again, returning for a second evaluation. He could not

proceed to the next lesson until he had satisfactorily completed the objectives of a given lesson. All objectives for a lesson were averaged for a lesson evaluation; then all lessons were averaged for a final evaluation. A student could determine his average at any time since copies of evaluation forms were distributed to the class, as well as maintained in a file. Moreover, a student could very much determine his grade for the course, as the following system of evaluation was announced:

A----Completion of four lessons with an evaluation of 95% or better, and four compositions.

B----Completion of four lessons with an evaluation of 90% or better, and two compositions.

C----Completion of three lessons with an evaluation of 90% or better, and one composition.

I----Completion of less than three lessons.

Students were aware of what was expected of them at each stage of the course, as the following sample lesson will show:

French 301: Lesson 1

1. OBJECTIVES:
   1. Demonstrate speaking ability by orally answering questions on material in lesson one with 90% accuracy and acceptable pronunciation and fluency.
   2. Demonstrate listening comprehension by writing answers to questions on material in lesson one with 90% accuracy.

ACTIVITIES:
1. Read material in lesson one and prepare to answer questions.
2. Listen to questions on Special Tape One/Lesson One.
3. Record your answer to the questions for practice.
4. Write your answers for practice.
5. Inform the teacher when you are ready to be tested.

2. OBJECTIVES: 1. Demonstrate listening comprehension and speaking ability by doing pattern drill exercises based on lesson one, with 90% accuracy and acceptable pronunciation and fluency.

ACTIVITIES: 1. Listen to exercises on Tape One/Lesson One.

2. Inform the teacher when you are ready to be tested.

3. OBJECTIVES: 1. Demonstrate speaking ability by reading the dialog of lesson one and orally answering questions on that dialog, with 90% accuracy and acceptable pronunciation and fluency.

2. Demonstrate listening and reading comprehension by writing the answers to oral questions on the dialog with 90% accuracy.

ACTIVITIES: 1. Listen to the dialog on Tape One/Lesson One.

2. Practice reading the dialog aloud.

3. Record the dialog and turn it in to the teacher.

4. Orally answer all questions at the end of the dialog.

5. Record answers and turn in to the teacher.

6. Write answers and turn in to the teacher.

7. Inform the teacher when you are ready to be tested.

4. OBJECTIVES: 1. Demonstrate listening comprehension and writing ability by writing a dictée based on lesson one with 90% accuracy.

ACTIVITIES: 1. Practice writing the dictée on Tape One/Lesson One.

2. Inform the teacher when you are ready to be tested.

5. OBJECTIVES: 1. Demonstrate knowledge and use of the present, future, and conditional tenses, and the imperative, by completing a series of exercises with 90% accuracy.

ACTIVITIES: 1. Read pp. 1-10 of L'Essentiel de la grammaire. Deuxième Édition.

2. Do exercises on pp. 1-23 of Travaux Pratiques. Deuxième Édition.

6. OBJECTIVES: 1. Demonstrate writing ability by writing a composition of 100-150 words based on one of the topics selected from the list on pp. 11-12, or another topic of your own choosing after consultation with the teacher.

ACTIVITIES: 1. Read information on pp. 1-12 of L'Art de la conversation.

2. Read the dialog on pp. 13-15.

3. Do the exercises on Tape One/Lesson One.

4. Write a composition and turn it in to the teacher.

As can be readily determined, all of the basic language skills are amply emphasized. Unlike the traditional conversation classes in which all students do not actively participate all the time, in the individualized format each student has to perform. Sufficient allowance is made for free conversation through the group discussions, as well as individual discussions with the instructor. Students are very receptive to this format, as it is flexible and allows them to work additionally in areas in which they are weak. A survey conducted at the end of the winter quarter of 1974 revealed that while students had to do considerably more work, they generally preferred this program to the traditional lock-step system, since they felt that they had gotten much more out of the course. Similar opinions were expressed at the end of the spring and fall quarters.

During the four quarters that the program has been in effect, the following grades were allotted:

	A	B	C	I	Total
Winter, 1974	3	4	2		9
Spring, 1974	3	3			6
Fall, 1974	6	9		1	16
Winter, 1975	5	11			16
Spring, 1975		In Progress			25

At the present, plans include continuing the Individualized French Composition and Conversation course, as well as developing a similar

program at the elementary and intermediate levels. While not the panacea of all problems, individualization offers numerous advantages over traditional approaches to teaching, not the least of which are allowances for individual differences, and teaching for mastery of materials. In this age of diminishing enrollments in foreign language courses, it behooves us as teachers to reshape our thinking and to develop programs which are student-centered, thereby providing greater opportunity for a more meaningful learning experience.